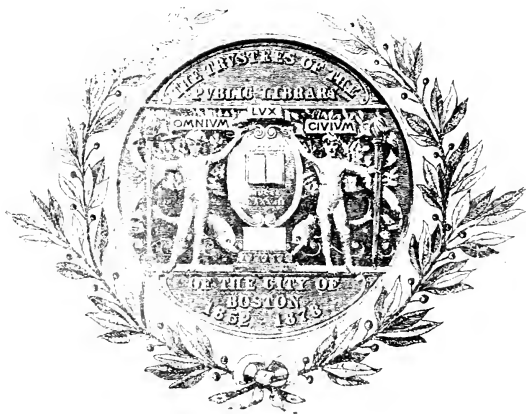


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ADVICE TO AN INEXPERIENCED TEACHER OF HISTORY.

BY

W. C. COLLAR,

ROXBURY LATIN SCHOOL.

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ADVICE TO AN INEXPERIENCED TEACHER OF HISTORY.

BY W. C. COLLAR, ROXBURY LATIN SCHOOL.

YOU contemplate your task with a kind of despairing shudder, and it is not strange. If we except the instructors in a relatively small number of city high schools, the American teacher who is a college graduate is supposed to be equipped for instructing in most branches of human knowledge, or, to speak guardedly, at least in languages, ancient and modern, physical and natural science, mathematics, history, and English literature.

History has been with you a favorite pastime rather than a subject of severe, absorbing, protracted study. You have read a good number of standard histories of ancient and modern times without attempting to make a careful and minute study of any one nation or period, and this you rightly feel is a very slender preparation for the weighty responsibilities that you are now to assume. For you have not to teach a definite portion of a well-defined subject in accordance with tried and accepted methods, or even under the guidance of certain established principles of historical instruction. The teaching of history has hardly yet reached the scientific stage. Both the *What* and the *How* are to be largely of your own invention. The subject itself is vast. It opens in many and far-reaching vistas that lose themselves in a tortuous complexity. Where is a clue to be found? Evidently time, reading, observation, experiment, reflection, judgment will all be needed.

Then what of the class of minds to be taught? For instruction must be adapted to the condition and needs of your pupils, or it will count for little. It is said that "the German pupil at the age of fifteen or sixteen has been able to complete two distinct surveys of universal history." It will not be safe to assume any such amount of knowledge and training in the case of high-school scholars of that age with us. Their acquaintance with history is most likely limited to a meagre outline of facts in English history, and such a knowledge of United States' history as may be got from the study of a manual like Anderson's or Berard's. It is hardly necessary to say that the imagination has not probably been cultivated by their contact with history, still less have they any developed historical sense, any notion of the continuity of history, and most likely no love whatever of historical reading. It is fortunate if they do not think of history as a mere collection of dry facts, without interest or significance,—a dreary, barren study, to be cast aside and done with as soon as possible. How often does one hear from children the exclamation, "Oh! I hate history!" Or from grown persons, "I never could get interested in history."

Finally, account must be taken of the school time allotted to history. This reveals perhaps the most discouraging feature of all. I have found three hours a week for a year too little time for Greek and Roman history alone; but that, I am sure, would seem in most high schools a liberal, if not excessive, allowance of time for a much wider range. The statement made in another essay in this volume, that "In America, history is generally crowded into one or two terms, or at most into a single year," is probably within the mark.

Such, then, are some of the conditions under which you must work. A consciousness of inadequate preparation,

insufficient time, and pupils without historical training. The situation is not exhilarating; but neither is it without hope. Certainly it is of the utmost importance first to appreciate clearly under what limitations one must work, and then to conceive definitely the kind and amount of work to be done. To supply your own lack of knowledge and training will be the slow task of years; but nothing is so satisfying and stimulating as the consciousness of progress. This is the one of the conditions enumerated that it lies in your own power to change, and you may be sure that on the increasing depth and fulness and freshness of your own knowledge will depend in large measure the interest and progress of your pupils, that is, the power and success of your instruction, and accordingly your own satisfaction in your work.

Let us suppose the subject of ancient history is assigned to you. The field is immense, and the time is absurdly inadequate. But it is only the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans, whose history and literatures are of great interest and importance to us; and many as are the points of contact of these nations with Egypt, Phœnicia, Assyria, Persia, and a few other oriental peoples, some incidental notice only of these relations will suffice. Thus, the area is at once greatly circumscribed. And even Hebrew history must not be permitted to occupy a relatively large place; partly because a considerable portion of it is not important; partly because what is of the greatest value to us requires, for its comprehension and appreciation, a degree of mental training and maturity. The Hebrews have transmitted to us their conceptions of God, of religion, and of morality. Their thoughts, beliefs, aspirations, emotions, have entered into our inmost being, and constantly affect our outward life and conduct. Their ecstasy of joy, of triumph, of hope; their passion of remorse, of sorrow, of despair, have been embalmed in our

sacred music, and hallowed by the most tender and solemn associations of religion. Their language and their imagery have permeated our literature and color our daily speech. But it would be vain to attempt to show a class of beginners the immensity of the influence for good, and likewise for evil, that has been wrought upon us through the ages, by the faith, the ethics, the laws, the literature of that strange people. Of these things, a partial, fragmentary, or even incidental treatment must suffice.

But to be more precise. As a basis for such instruction, as circumstances allow, it is enough to read with a class, first, the life and work of Moses, contained in the first twenty-four chapters of Exodus, and the first three and the thirty-fourth chapters of Deuteronomy; second, the first eleven chapters of Joshua; and, finally, the life of David.

It is necessary to assume some familiarity with Bible stories; though how so many intelligent boys and girls, accustomed to attendance at Sunday-schools, grow up without such familiar knowledge is something of a mystery. The discovery, some years ago, that in a class of thirty bright boys of about fourteen years of age, only three understood an allusion to the story of Ruth and Boaz, led to my laying out a course of Bible reading in my own school for each year of a six years' curriculum.

Thus far, we have considered the nature and scope of your work, and have pointed out some of the limitations imposed by circumstances for which you are not responsible, but which you must not disregard. It is time to speak of the method of teaching. But the method must be determined in the main by the object aimed at. If the object is to deposit in the mind the greatest number possible of historical facts, there is perhaps no better way than to confine the instruction to drill upon the contents of a manual by question and

answer, with frequent examinations in writing. Such a method would probably be effective in two ways : it would give learners positive knowledge, or the semblance of it, and it would pretty certainly make them hate history. I do not hesitate to say that the ultimate purpose of school instruction should be to incite an interest in history, and to create a love for historical reading. If this is a correct view, it gives the key to right methods ; and, from other essays in this volume, you will gather many useful suggestions. Only consider well what hints you can use. Remember that your task is not that of a college professor. It is very different, and it is much more difficult. Therefore, many excellent methods described by eminent teachers of history in the preceding essays you may be unable to put in practice. You have to deal with minds less mature and less capable of independent study ; and you cannot probably send your pupils to a well-furnished library for reading and research. Perhaps what is contained in this volume, in answer to the question "How shall history be taught?" is most directly helpful. Let me try to add some suggestions derived from my own experience.

I will suppose that your pupils have some brief manual of Roman or Greek history, like "Creighton's Primer of Roman History," or "Smith's Smaller History of Greece." First read over the lesson assigned for the next day, or portions of it, with the class ; indicate briefly what is of greater and what of less importance ; make such explanations as are needful for an intelligent comprehension of the text, and indicate what dates should be committed to memory.

A word may be here most conveniently said on the subject of chronology. A few dates should be well fixed in the memory ; they should be carefully selected by the teacher, and some explanation given of their significance. But "a few," you will say, is a little indefinite. Of course, opinions

will differ as to the number of indispensable dates in any history, though there might be a general assent to the principle of requiring the pupil to commit as few as possible. Of the two hundred and fifty dates given in "Smith's Smaller History of Greece," I insist on fifteen, and I think the number might be reduced to ten. But if learners are properly taught, they will, of course, be able to determine a great many dates approximately. For example, a boy who has clearly understood the cause, purpose, and results of the Confederacy of Delos could not possibly place it in time far wrong, with reference to great events before and after it; and a single important date in the century well remembered would enable him to fix very nearly its absolute time.

Remembering that you must make history interesting, to that end use all available means to produce vivid impressions. This is a trite remark, but it will bear repeating. Casts, models, coins, photographs, relief maps, may not be at your command; but maps of some sort you must have. Historical instruction, without the constant accompaniment of geography, has no solid foundation,—“is all in the air.” The imagination must be stirred; the sympathies must be quickened. How? I answer, first, by drawing with judgment from your own stores of knowledge. An interesting, but perhaps not historically important, incident is merely alluded to, or not mentioned at all in the manual used by the class. Tell the story in all its details. You might read it in a form more perfect from a literary point of view, but you ought to be able to tell it in a way far more impressive, and that is the main thing. For events of a different class, I should, following suggestions more than once made in this volume, read from original, and, if possible, from contemporary records. What a vivid idea, for instance, will be got of the plague at Athens from the reading of a few pages from “Thucydides,” with a word

or two added from modern medical studies of that scourge. The opportunity and the advantage of studying history from original documents is one strong reason why I have advised the study of a small portion of Hebrew history, though I am not ignorant what modern criticism has established regarding the age and authorship of those writings. It is not necessary, however, to communicate to a class knowledge for which they are not prepared.

But for awakening the sympathies and moving the imagination of children, I attach greater importance to the aid to be derived from imaginative literature, particularly poetry. Poetry gives life and reality to history. History describes, poetry paints; and this is often true of poetry that ranks neither in the first nor in the second order. For years I have found it very useful to have Macaulay's "Lays of Ancient Rome" read in connection with the mythical part of Roman History. There is nothing like the magic charm, whether of sublimity or pathos, that poetry lends to historical events, persons, and places. Who can read Milman's magnificent ode on the Israelites crossing the Red Sea without a consciousness, if he reflects upon it, of a fresh and more vivid realization of a scene familiar to his imagination from childhood? How Scott's beautiful hymn, sung by Rebecca in "Ivanhoe," makes us see, as the Scripture narrative never did, the slow onward toiling of the Israelites through the rocky fastnesses and over the sandy deserts of Arabia, guided by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night!

At the distance of forty years I recall the emotion, the tears, with which I read in our country school reading-book a poem which I have never since seen, entitled "Jugurtha in Prison," beginning,

"Well, is the rack prepared, the pincers heated?"

I knew nothing of Jugurtha, neither when he lived nor in what part of the world, nor what he had done that he was to be starved to death in prison. It is true, in this particular case, that if I had known what a scamp Jugurtha was, my sympathies for him would have been considerably less ardent; but in that case they would only have been transferred to his brothers, whom he had so foully murdered.

With what a swell of patriotic pride, too, did I use as a boy to recite, —

“Departed spirits of the mighty dead,
Ye that at Marathon and Leuctra bled.”

“Marathon and Leuctra” signified nothing to me. I had not the remotest idea who the “mighty dead” were who had fallen there, but I felt as if it would have been a joy to have shed my blood with them.

Do not make the mistake, which I am afraid is a common one, of teaching the history of one ancient nation as if it had no relation to that of any other. To point out relations, to contrast and compare times, institutions, events, men, is one of the most delightful and most useful parts of the teacher’s work. To encourage pupils to discover likenesses and differences is to promote thinking, to enlarge the mental horizon, to induce a habit of mind of inestimable value. Take, for example, the fundamental laws of the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans; their constitutions, which embodied and expressed their most striking and distinctive national characteristics. It would be easy to show, how on the one hand the Mosaic constitution, the Decalogue, aimed to make men moral and religious; while on the other the Greek and Roman constitutions sought to form men into soldiers, and to make them into members of a body politic. Hence the importance of private conduct under the one, and its relative unimportance under the other, with all the far-reaching

consequences that followed. In the study of Greek history a comparison of the two rival states, Athens and Sparta, in spirit and policy, and the tracing of the immediate and remote effects on themselves and all Hellas, will not only impart increased interest, by bringing into clearer relief the essential characteristics, the heroism, the selfishness, the hardihood, the cruelty, the narrowness of the one, and the intelligence, love of knowledge and beauty, but also, alas ! the sensuality, levity, and weakness of the other ; but it will suggest many an important lesson, and will be an excellent preparation for the reading of modern history with a more intelligent observation and reflection.

Again, how interesting is the comparison in detail of the growth of the Athenian constitution under Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles, with that slowly evolved among the Romans after the beginning made by Servius Tullus, by the struggle for two centuries between the patricians and plebeians. There is the same exclusive possession of political rights on the part of the nobles, and accordingly the same control of government by the few for their own benefit and pleasure ; the same misery, poverty, and indebtedness of the lower classes ; the same struggle to escape from intolerable burdens, and then to share equally with the more fortunate the rights of citizenship, that meant so much in ancient times ; the same shifting of the basis and condition of political privileges from birth to wealth, estimated, observe, in both cases, by the amount or income of property in land ; and finally the same issue, the turning of the tables, the ultimate predominance of the people, and the transference of the sceptre of power from the noble by birth to the rich. And can there be a more interesting lesson in history than to continue this analogy, and trace the upward struggle of the common people in England ? There the same contest

has been going on for six hundred years; the same forces are at work, and there are many signs that the same results will follow.

I have anticipated in the last few sentences the only additional suggestion that I can now permit myself to make. I mean the comparison of ancient with modern history. According to Herbert Spencer, there is no thinking without a consciousness of similitude, and no knowing without a perception of relation, difference, and likeness. If, then, comparison, conscious or unconscious, is a necessary condition of knowledge, is one in danger of pressing the comparative method of historical study too far? Explicit comparisons at every step are not necessary, and the strict limitations of time must not be forgotten. I have never failed to awaken interest by such comparisons, whether in the study of ancient or modern history, even when the basis of knowledge on the part of pupils was of the slenderest. But a striking parallelism pointed out here and there will be enough to give direction to the thoughts in reading history, to lead pupils, as has already been observed, to see and follow out analogies themselves, to bring home to the consciousness what is far away, and to recognize in what appears new and strange what is known or even familiar. Let me illustrate.

Suppose the topic for a lesson has been the Sicilian Expedition. There is hardly to be found a more thrilling narrative than that by the great Greek historian, and the reading of some pages from Thucydides may well occupy a half-hour. A class will hardly find in their course in ancient history so conspicuous an example of the utter disastrous failure of an important undertaking through the irresolution and incapacity of a leader. Let the teacher now tell the story of the Peninsula Campaign of McClellan in our late Rebellion, to illustrate how history is repeated in events and in the

characters of men. Nicias was a man of upright character and respectable talents, but as a general cautious to timidity, and in a pinch incapable of coming to a decision. He was one of those men who are always thought to be sure to do great things, without its being possible to tell what inspires such confidence. He had the resources of the state at his back, and to support him the unflinching determination of his countrymen to win. He was ably seconded by his subordinates, and he *almost* achieved a great success. But at the last moment victory slipped from his grasp, and the hopeless ruin of all his plans quickly followed. Such was McClellan to the life in every respect, and so ended disastrously his strategy of the spade. As the elder Nicias barely missed capturing Syracuse, so did the modern Nicias all but take Richmond.

Again, at first, a boy or girl would not see much likeness in the characters of the Romans and the English. But reflection, aided by the hints and questions of the teacher, would bring out a surprising number of points of resemblance, and it would appear that the English might be fairly called the Romans of the modern world. There is at bottom the same solidity, massiveness, and sobriety of nature. The same indomitable will and tenacity of purpose is characteristic of the two peoples. They are alike in their respect for woman, their domesticity, their love of old-fashioned ways and things, their arrogance, their dislike of foreigners. They have above all other nations a genius for law and government.

Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento,
Hæc tibi erunt artes; pacisque imponere morem,
Parcere subjectis, et debellare superbos.

In many ways their defects and limitations are the same. The brusqueness, harshness, and indifference to the rights

and feelings of others which foreigners complain of in the English, seem to have been traits of the Romans. Cato, a typical Roman, was willing that the prayer of the Achæan exiles should be granted that they might return to their own country after having languished seventeen years in prison, but he gave his consent in these gracious words: "Have we nothing better to do than to sit here all day long debating whether a parcel of worn-out Greeks shall be carried to their graves here or in Achaia?" Both are incapable of the highest excellence in certain forms of art. Matthew Arnold is fond of repeating of a large part of his countrymen, that they are characterized by "a defective type of religion, a narrow range of intellect and knowledge, a stunted sense of beauty, a low standard of manners." This seems to be equally true of the Roman Philistine, and, I imagine, true of a far larger part of the whole body of the Romans than of the English.

Our aim has been to show how to give life and reality to history, and we have seen that the methods by which this end may be reached are also those by which the greatest benefits are to be derived from historical study; I mean the culture of the imagination, the quickening of the sympathies, the elevation of the moral nature, the forming of mental habits of observation, comparison, and reflection, and finally an increased interest in history and general literature.

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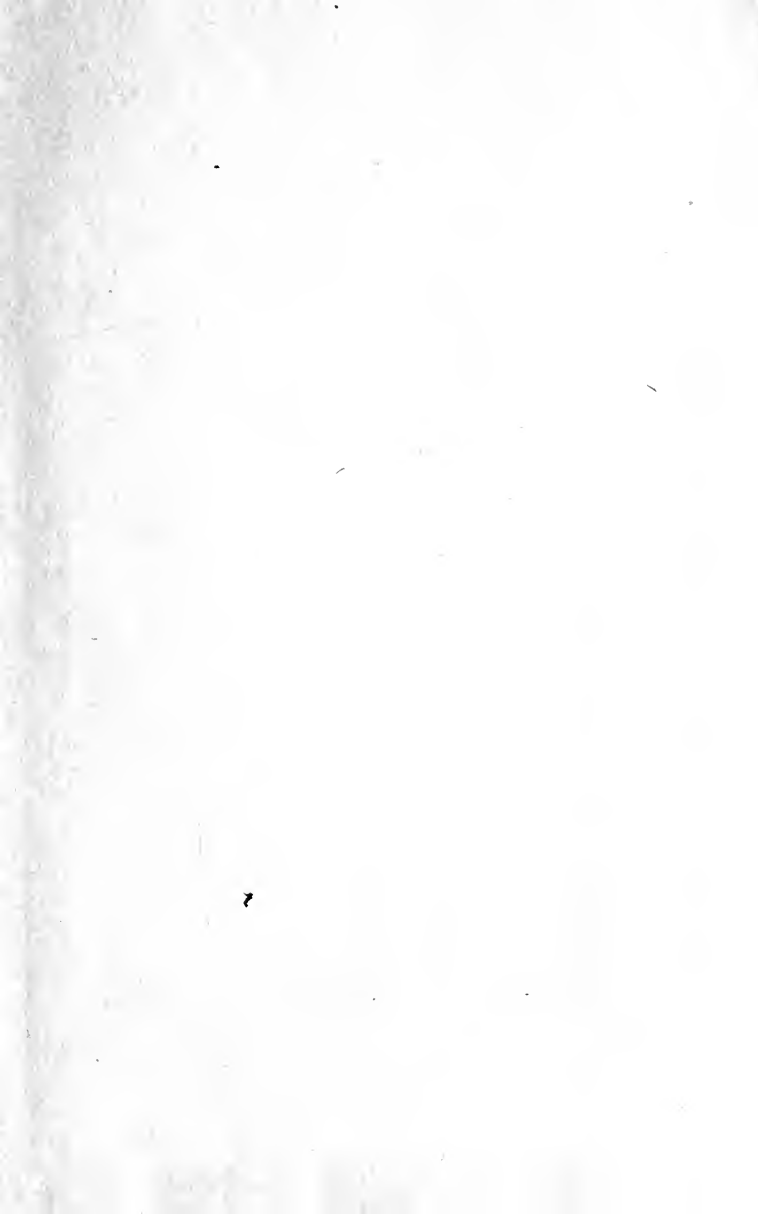
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